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FALSE MODESTY IN READERS.

THERE are thousands upon thousands of playgoers—excellent and useful members of the community—who are too liberal and well balanced to fear contamination from seeing a drama acted, yet would shrink with horror from any contact with the world behind the scenes. Henry S. Leigh, author of the graceful “*Carols of Cockayne*,” hits off a type of this class in his lines entitled “*Behind the Scenes*”:

“I was a youngster at the time,
Just verging on my teens,
And fancied that it must be ‘prime’
To go *behind the scenes*.
I ventured to express the same
In quite a candid way,
And shock’d my aunt—a sober dame,
Though partial to the play.”

Does not the attitude of such people figure pretty fairly that of many readers, who are pleased with a work of fiction so long as it presents a certain artificial resemblance to life, but begin to clamor against it if they find that it is too nearly true to actual human existence? They do not want a novel to be too real, too outspoken—especially when it deals with vicious or immoral actions. They know perfectly well that such actions constantly occur in the world; that these actions are gross, abominable and unmitigated, when contemplated as actual facts; but they do not like to have this truth brought out plainly in fiction. They want to have the fiction seem very nearly like life; yet, to please them, it must ignore a good deal. It must preserve for them the illusion, for the time being, that human life makes rather a fine show, and is an interesting, exciting spectacle—amusing or pathetic, as the case may be—but never really vulgar or hideous to excess. In a word, they do not wish, in reading a novel, to go “*behind the scenes*.” Yet, in their own careers,

their own histories—their personal gossip about public men, acquaintances, and even friends—are they not constantly going there? Why, then, do they object to doing so in fiction?

Their objection to going behind the scenes of a theatre is based, partly, in addition to the fear of losing their illusion, upon the current belief that there is a more than average tendency to immorality among actors. Without discussing the correctness of that belief, we may remark that the dread of going behind the scenes of life, in a novel, seems to rest *not* upon a belief, but upon positive knowledge, that much immorality will be found there. It is said that to explore and discuss this immorality is contaminating; that it has the same effect as actual association with low or criminal people. On grounds of public policy, it is better not to make these things public; the influence of such explorations or discussions on children and young people will be bad, and therefore they should be condemned, etc. But is the influence, in truth, any more damaging than that of sermons from the pulpit treating of the same subjects, but in a manner so vague, pallid and remote as to be, for all practical purposes, ineffectual. The arguments against open representation, and, consequently, debate of immorality, rest upon the assumption that the less a bad thing is talked about, the more likely it is to be cured or eradicated. But we know that in fact this is not true. Political corruptionists, for example, would like to have us believe it, and so leave their practices undisturbed in the dark. But publicity is essential to reform. So, too, gambling and drunkenness are freely discussed, and the latter vice may be depicted as vividly as you please in novels, without exciting remonstrance. Only sexual passion, it seems, must not be considered in its erratic, abnormal or injurious phases, although this passion is the most potent of all in the world, is at the very basis of life, and, when it degenerates into vice or lawlessness, is the most dangerous, the most destructive force to which character and happiness can be exposed. Why should this chief element in the problem of human existence and society alone be ignored?

Because, say the advocates of arbitrary restriction, it is immodest to talk or write about it. Twenty years ago, the subject of house-drainage could not with propriety be discussed among people of refinement in this country. The progress of sanitary science made its discussion a necessity. And, finding that it was wiser to

talk of these things than ignorantly to die from dirt and foul gases, intelligent people of refinement learned that there was no immodesty in openly considering improved drains, traps, and "flushing" systems. The greater part of our rural population is still so falsely delicate that, in this respect, it lives in a condition of uncleanness worse than that of savages; and Southerners apparently prefer to perish of yellow fever, and attribute their death to a "germ," rather than to speak of the cause as filth and remove the same.

Now, as to the delicacy of discussing the morals involved in questions of sexual passion, how did the censors of fiction obtain their ideas respecting modesty and immodesty? Was it not by observation, or experience, or instruction? They were all, at one time, innocent and ignorant young people. Have the observation, experience, or instruction by which they gained their knowledge corrupted them? Not necessarily. They would be the first to deny it. Why, then, must other young people necessarily be corrupted in gaining such knowledge partly from novels?

One thing is very curious. Men and women will go and sit together at a play, where subjects and complications are represented which they would not ordinarily converse about together, and no harm is either done or suspected. This is permissible, because the drama is—by original nature and intention, at least—a work of art, having an improving aim, and must, therefore, be allowed a freedom which, if habitual in the conversation of the two sexes, would doubtless lead to blunted sensibilities and eventual indelicacy. But the same men and women will take violent exception to the same situations, themes and modes of treatment, when met with in a novel, which they tolerated or even approved in the play. Indignant men and women also diligently read novels which have been proclaimed as improper, and then freely compare notes about them, discuss them, and join in condemning them.

The point presents itself: If such books are immodest, is it not immodest for the sexes to talk them over in this way? The censors who do it should in justice be estopped from blaming the authors. Modesty and decency are, at best, relative. The association of men and women in bathing costume on the sea-beach may be entirely harmless, but would be clearly indecent, accord-

ing to our ideas, in a drawing-room. Yet in a ball-room ladies may expose a considerable part of their persons without contravening polite custom ; whereas if men were to denude themselves to the same extent, in the same place, the ladies would fly from the room with their modesty shocked.

I contend, too, that those ladies who, at the seashore calmly criticise the shortness of other ladies' bathing-skirts, and make no scruple of doing so in the presence of their male friends, are guilty of an immodesty from which the sensible action of the other women, who use short skirts for bathing, is quite free. The common gossip, also, of even good society is, in its suggestiveness, its pruriency, its lingering over unsavory topics, more against decency and good morals than most of the really indecent, or any of the falsely called indecent, novels ever published.

There is a Law of Silence in the code of good and pure manners, founded on a strong instinct in human nature, which forbids too much reference to certain things. The same law must obtain to some extent in art. The one difficulty is to determine how far it shall be applied, and in what manner. We may safely say that when an author dwells persistently on the grosser elements of human nature or sexual passion, without fine, justifying moral or artistic purpose ; or appears to gloat over diseased passion ; or lingers morbidly upon unclean details ; he has passed the bounds of propriety common to both art and manners, and is a subject for more or less reproof. Zola, Ouida and George Moore do this. Alphonse Daudet has been guilty of it in "*Sappho*," Théophile Gautier in "*Mlle. De Maupin*," and so have many others. But our amateur censors, with their rickety, uncertain and inconsistent standards of false modesty, are not qualified to apply the test at all. Either the Bible, to them, must be a corrupting book, or else they are hopelessly inconsistent if they defend it as being fit to read. This false modesty results from a mistaken method of bringing up children—especially girls—and is far more dangerous and insidious than a frank and healthy-minded contemplation of even dubious literature, for the reason that it rests upon hypocrisy, error and deceit.

GEORGE PARSONS LATHROP.